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Tomblin, other officials discuss leak response moving forward

by [Dave Boucher](#)

Daily Mail Capitol Bureau Chief

Joined by a host of local, state and federal officials, Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin said the government hasn't forgotten about the Elk River chemical spill.

"It will be a month tomorrow when this chemical spill happened," Tomblin said Wednesday during a press conference. "We will not lose sight of our goal of keeping your water safe."

During the press conference, the governor's first in two weeks, Tomblin said officials will continue to be vigilant.

He said testing at the water plant will continue "for the foreseeable future" and that state officials would oversee the changing of filters at the West Virginia American Water Plant, a process the company has said will take some time.

On Jan. 9, officials discovered thousands of gallons of crude MCHM and PPH leaking from a hole in a storage tank owned by Freedom Industries. At least 10,000 gallons is believed to have escaped the container, an unknown amount of which made it into the Elk River.

Shortly thereafter, the chemicals overwhelmed the filtration system at the water treatment facility about 1.5 miles downstream from the spill.

Officials from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency spoke Wednesday, the first time they've joined the governor during a press conference.

Dr. Tanja Popovic, acting director of the CDC's National Center for Environmental Health, briefly described the CDC's involvement in helping state officials.

She said people could drink the water, bathe in it and use it however they like.

That doesn't mean it's safe, a word that's apparently not in the CDC's vocabulary.

"We're not really talking about if the water is safe, we're talking about is the water appropriate for use, given the information we know about MCHM," Popovic said after the press conference.

"We do not use the term safe . . . because that does not well describe what we can do with the information that we have," she said.

The CDC created the line for how much crude MCHM could likely be in the water and not cause adverse health affects. That 1-part-per-million level was crafted using the information available, Popovic said.

She said the procedure relied heavily on the fact that little is known about the chemical and therefore extra caution is needed.

She added an "interagency team" with officials from several federal agencies who have a combined 200 years in toxicological experienced concurred with the CDC level.

The CDC is not ready to say if symptoms reported by hundreds of people after the spill are in fact connected to the spill, Popovic said. She then said, based in part on the severity of those symptoms, it's "unlikely" the chemical will cause long-term adverse health affects.

Her answers seemed to vary some after the press conference.

The CDC told pregnant women not to drink the water with any amount of crude MCHM almost a week after it said water with less than 1 part per million of the chemical was likely safe.

Popovic didn't give a straight answer as to whether pregnant women should drink it.

"I think that the pregnant women need to address the issue of water just like they address anything else: They may not want to eat certain food, they may not want to fly. It doesn't mean that flying isn't safe, but they want to take precautions that make them feel good."

EPA Administrator Shawn Garvin and Bill Arguto, the EPA's chief of the region's "drinking water branch" also spoke.

EPA officials have been in West Virginia almost since the day the spill was discovered, Garvin said, but have provided little information because the state is in charge.

While the EPA has commented in response to some media requests, he said it tries to let the state spearhead communications.

"When we don't have the lead, we work with those on the ground who have the lead for the messaging," he said.

As many others at the state and federal level continue to repeat, Garvin said smelly water doesn't necessarily mean unsafe water.

The first CDC team didn't arrive in West Virginia until Jan. 16, according to a statement by a CDC spokeswoman. However, Popovic and state officials said they were in contact via phone and email.

There needs to be some surveillance of the local community to see if more people report symptoms or other health problems moving forward, Garvin said. She was quick to emphasize that doesn't mean creating a monitoring system, necessarily.

The CDC team that came Jan. 16 and left Friday conducted its own review of available patient data, and will provide local health officials with the final report when it's ready, Popovic said.

Garvin said an EPA drinking water expert would remain here to work with state health officials. They'll also continue to help the state Department of Environmental Protection at the site of the spill and the other agencies involved in testing.

That wasn't the focus of Wednesday's meeting, though.

Both Dr. Letitia Tierney, state health officer and commissioner of the Bureau for Public Health, and DEP Secretary Randy Huffman described it as a chance to put names to faces.

"Nothing special happened today, other than (Garvin) personally showed up, that was the only thing that was different today," Huffman said.

Tierney said the conversation was beneficial in that the officials confirmed ideas she suspected to be true.

Tierney and other state officials emphasized they are relying on the expertise of people working at the federal level.

"I have confidence in these people," Tierney said, referencing all government workers involved.

"They've dedicated their life to not having fame or fortune, but to the betterment of the human kind. If I can't trust them, I can't trust anybody."